

To: Garvin, Shawn[garvin.shawn@epa.gov]
Cc: schaffer, joan[schaffer.joan@epa.gov]; White, Terri-A[White.Terri-A@epa.gov]; D'Andrea, Michael[DANDREA.MICHAEL@EPA.GOV]; Ryan, Daniel[Ryan.Daniel@epa.gov]; Ferrell, Mark[Ferrell.Mark@epa.gov]; Miller, Linda[miller.linda@epa.gov]
From: Seneca, Roy
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Tomblin directs state to conduct home water testing

By [Ken Ward Jr.](#)

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- Two hours after dismissing the idea at a high-profile news conference, Tomblin administration officials said Wednesday they would come up with a testing plan to see if Crude MCHM from the Jan. 9 Elk River leak is still inside home plumbing systems in West Virginia.

Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin directed the multi-agency team handling the state's leak response to come up with a plan for testing a representative sample of homes, said Amy Goodwin, the governor's communications director.

"This is something that we have discussed and will continue to discuss and work through best practices in developing a plan of action," Goodwin said.

The announcement followed an afternoon news conference the Governor's Office staged to try to quell growing public concern about the water supply and the long-term impact of the leak.

In the reception area just outside Tomblin's Capitol office, officials from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention crowded around a podium with a large contingent of state government representatives.

The event came just two days after residents at a legislative public hearing repeatedly complained about the Tomblin administration's handling of the crisis that followed the chemical leak that contaminated the drinking water for 300,000 West Virginians.

"I am frustrated and angry," the governor told reporters and television cameras. "I share your concerns about the water crisis. I heard you, and I am listening."

Tomblin dismissed questions about any plans for home testing of tap water, saying there was no way the state or federal government could do such sampling in all 100,000 homes and businesses impacted by the leak.

Asked why the state doesn't instead do a study that examines a smaller, but representative sample of how MCHM is reacting with home plumbing systems, the governor would say only, "That's one of those things we can look at doing."

Tomblin's comments on home testing echoed statements made Tuesday by EPA and CDC officials in interviews with the Gazette, that the state had no plans for home testing, and the federal government had decided not to press the Tomblin administration on the matter.

During the news conference, though, EPA and CDC officials had trouble answering when asked if testing of home tap water would provide them valuable data in understanding the potential long-term impact of the Freedom Industries' leak.

Dr. Tanja Popovic, director of the CDC's National Center for Environmental Health, said all home plumbing systems are different and that materials sometimes stop in them and sometimes move inside them.

That's exactly the argument that Andrew Whelton, a University of South Alabama environmental engineer who has been testing West Virginia water systems, had made in urging the government to test inside homes in the leak-impact area.

Popovic said a study of the sort Whelton has called for is not a bad idea but that officials would need to consider how many homes could be tested, and ensure it's a large enough sample to produce a reliable result.

Shawn Garvin, the regional EPA administrator, said his agency was comfortable with the state's initial decision not to test home water supplies, but he did not dispute that such testing would provide helpful information.

"We feel that the protocols that they have in place are appropriate," Garvin said after the news conference, "but if the state decides to do that, we would be supportive."

Garvin and Popovic made the federal government's first high-profile appearance in West Virginia since the Elk River chemical leak, joining with a governor who has been harshly critical of the Obama administration's environmental policies.

Earlier in the week, Tomblin administration officials and other state leaders had been trying to turn public discussions toward what they said were slow responses and lack of help from the CDC and the EPA. On Wednesday, though, the governor started the news conference by praising the federal agencies for their assistance.

The leak at Freedom Industries sent an estimated 10,000 gallons of the coal-cleaning chemical Crude MCHM and other substances into the Elk River, prompting a "do not use" order for Charleston and parts of eight surrounding counties. At least 500 people have sought medical attention at area hospitals and, despite assurances from West Virginia American Water and the government, many residents continue to use only bottled water.

Popovic used part of Wednesday's news conference to defend her agency's development of an emergency "screening level" of 1 part per million for MCHM.

CDC officials, she said, applied three levels of "uncertainty factors" to take into account their use of a laboratory rat test, potential impacts to sensitive populations and a troubling lack of data on the chemical.

"The question that keeps coming up -- is your water safe? -- with all of the science, everything that we have . . . so far, I can say that you can use your water however you like," Popovic said.

Outside public-health experts, though, have questioned whether the CDC had anywhere near enough data to draw any reliable conclusions and if agency officials properly considered impacts on sensitive populations and great unknowns about the industry-produced data they did have on MCHM.

In recent days, West Virginia residents have increasingly been asking why the state Department of Health and Human Resources or the National Guard are testing water for MCHM only at the water treatment plant, at fire hydrants and in some public buildings, such as schools.

Outside experts have expressed concern that the MCHM and other chemicals from the leak could have been absorbed by home plumbing systems, where it could continue to leach into water -- even if in very small amounts -- for some undetermined amount of time.

Whelton, the Alabama engineer, has been testing water from area homes and arguing publicly that more information is needed about how chemicals from the leak interact with varying types of home pipes and tanks.

In an email interview Tuesday night, Whelton had said officials were making a mistake if they didn't conduct a broader study of MCHM's presence in homes impacted by the leak.

"Chemical exposures occur inside homes at kitchen faucets, showers, etc., not at a hydrant," Whelton said. "Plumbing systems do not operate the same as buried pipe networks. There are clear differences."

Last week, Whelton was awarded a \$50,000 emergency grant from the National Science Foundation to study the way the MCHM from the leak acts when it enters home plumbing systems.

In announcing the grant, an NSF official called the Elk River leak "one of the largest human-made environmental disasters in this century." The foundation said one of the central unknowns about the leak's long-term impacts is how the chemicals interact with home plumbing systems.

At a U.S. Senate hearing Tuesday, an official from the Natural Resources Defense Council noted Whelton's research but said the grant provides "insufficient resources to conduct an extensive testing regime representative of the 300,000 customers affected."

During an interview Tuesday, Larry Cseh, an emergency response coordinator with the CDC and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, said any decision for the federal government to test for MCHM testing in homes would be up to the EPA.

In another interview Tuesday, EPA regional water-protection chief Jon Capacasa initially said he was under the impression that tap water was being tested inside homes.

"My understanding is that a lot of different types of monitoring and testing have been done in the schools, at the taps, in homes, and in distribution systems and finished water leaving the plant," Capacasa said. "We're encouraged by the fact that it shows diminished presence of these chemicals in the water, if not non-detect."

Told that neither the state nor the water company had been testing inside homes, Capacasa responded, "I can't speak definitely to it, but I'm aware of the school sampling, which I think was taps. I know all of the sample results have been published online for review. I'm encouraged by that."

Asked for specifics of the home testing he referred to, Capacasa finally said, "You bring up a good point. Let me do my homework on that before I comment. If that's a concern, we certainly will track that down and make sure we are getting the best information possible."

Several hours later, EPA spokeswoman Bonnie Smith said in an email to the Gazette, "Our drinking water program confirmed with WV Bureau of Public Health and WV American Water that none of the distribution system sampling was done in homes.

"Samples were collected at hydrants and other locations, where samplers could access water representative of particular pressure zones," Smith said. "These samples reflected water quality in the water mains, which is water that would be delivered to homes/buildings/etc."

Smith added, "[The] EPA has reviewed the home flushing protocol that the water company has developed, and believes that if properly implemented by homeowners, the flushing should result in water quality which is representative of what is being delivered to the homes."

Asked to comment on the EPA's statement, Whelton said, "To my knowledge, [the] EPA has not provided any field data to justify their conclusions. It is possible that [the] EPA is simply traveling in [to West Virginia] to reaffirm their position without conducting any unbiased testing to test their assumption.

"It is baffling why any official would make those statements without hard data, which they could have collected already," Whelton said.

Reach Ken Ward Jr. at kw...@wvgazette.com or 304-348-1702.

